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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON POLITICAL REFORM IN JORDAN

Classified By: Charge David Hale for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) After a hopeful start, a well-publicized push for political reform announced by King Abdullah in late 2003 lost momentum as the GOJ struggled internally with unresolved questions on both the pace and extent of change. Heightened security concerns have given a louder voice to officials wary of greater public freedoms, and contributed to a crackdown on Islamist political activity. Eager to keep Jordan at the forefront of regional reform in Western eyes, the King is relying on two recent royal commissions to advance the reform agenda and to fulfill his stated desire to promote grassroots political participation. Many Jordanians will remain skeptical of the King's controlled, top-down approach to reform, and he will need to make some tough decisions when the time comes to transfer real power to democratic institutions. End Summary.

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ALL ABOARD THE REFORM TRAIN!  
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¶2. (U) After achieving significant progress in reforming the Jordanian economy, King Abdullah turned his eye toward political reform in late 2003. In a public letter to incoming Prime Minister Faisal al-Fayez in October 2003, the King laid out his vision for the new government and declared that political development should be "at the top" of its priorities. He called for greater "political openness" and "active and real participation" of all segments of society in Jordanian political life, while highlighting the need for a new political parties law and a "more democratic" elections law. The King reinforced his message of deep-rooted political reform in his address at the opening of Parliament on December 1, 2003. Declaring that it was the duty of all Jordanians to create "a radical, positive transformation in our democratization process," he further noted that political parties established by "the grassroots" with comprehensive platforms were "vital and necessary" for the country.

¶3. (C) Such statements by the King and other GOJ officials initially encouraged public and private debate on policy issues. Criticism of the government increased as Jordanians cautiously reacted to the apparent relaxation of some of the unwritten limits on public expression. Meanwhile, the newly created Ministry of Political Development -- despite limited resources and a lackluster minister -- moved forward on an ambitious series of meetings between senior GOJ officials (including PM Fayedz) and a variety of different groups to discuss elements of political reform. The ministry also produced in May 2004 a draft strategy and plan of action for political development that was forthright in assessing the obstacles to the creation of a democratic culture in Jordan and that contained specific objectives including the adoption of new legislation on elections, political parties, and women's rights. A large public opinion poll and a "national gathering" were planned to gauge popular expectations regarding the plan.

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LOSING STEAM  
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¶4. (C) While USAID-supported programs aimed at promoting educational and judicial reform continued to move forward, the GOJ push for democratization and political reform lost momentum as 2004 progressed. The action plan created by the Ministry of Political Development, which had been developed without any parliamentary input, virtually disappeared from the public arena. The pace of public meetings on political reform topics slackened. A number of contacts increasingly told us that the government's emphasis on political development had "amounted to nothing." Polling data indicated that Jordanians were at least as afraid to voice freely their opinions in public as they had been prior to the political reform campaign. Government statements on reform shifted gears and put the need for administrative and public sector reform at center stage.

¶5. (C) Various factors contributed to the slow-down in movement on political reform. Probably the most important reason is that the GOJ had never agreed internally on the

pace, scope and mechanics of democratization. After laying some groundwork for political reform as described above, the government simply did not know how to proceed further. Contacts painted a picture of a cabinet divided on this issue, with reform-minded ministers wanting to move forward while conservative, old-guard ministers (backed by the ever-cautious security establishment) were just as happy for political reform to inch along, if not cease altogether. The reshuffling of the cabinet in October 2004 did little to alleviate this stalemate. The Prime Minister's heart was with the conservatives, who also dominate parliament.

16. (C) The go-slow camp was strengthened by the disruption of a major terrorist plot in April 2004 aimed at GOJ targets and the U.S. Embassy. This event, along with other security threats and the danger posed by the Zarqawi terrorist network, emboldened those who argued that too much openness and change could endanger national security. Heightened security concerns and fear of extremism also contributed to government moves to reign in Islamist political activity. There followed a round-up of unlicensed mosque preachers, the brief detention of Islamic Action Front (IAF) members for giving "political speeches" after Friday prayers, the seizure of the Muslim Brotherhood's charitable fund-raising boxes, and a campaign to stymie Islamists' use of professional associations through vote-rigging and diversion of union dues.

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THE KING STEPS IN  
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17. (C) Stalled progress on political development did not go unnoticed by the palace. Stymined by his cabinet's lack of action, and conscious that Jordan's image as a regional reform leader was being eroded by developments in neighboring states, King Abdullah went around his ministers and parliament in December by appointing two royal commissions to push forward his reform agenda. The first, mostly comprised of old-guard elements, will study the establishment of regional assemblies with devolved powers designed to move decision-making closer to ordinary citizens. The second, which has a much more diverse membership, will bring together a wide range of civil society representatives and government figures to establish a broad-based "national agenda" to include political reform. Palace officials also state that new legislation on elections and political parties will be unveiled with the release of the commissions' recommendations, probably around the end of the year. (NOTE: PM Fayed told the press March 7 that the government had already "outlined" a new elections law, but would "slow down" moves to reform the electoral system pending the work of the royal commissions. END NOTE.)

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COMMENT  
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18. (C) Our reformist contacts outside government almost without exception express skepticism concerning the latest royal commissions, particularly the one focused on decentralization, as its members lack reform credentials and will reportedly conduct most of their work behind closed doors. The King is insistent, however, that these commissions constitute "irreversible" steps toward democratization and that their final recommendations will be implemented. Even if he is sincere in his desire to open the political system, the King's use of palace-appointed commissions indicates that he wants reform on his terms. This, in turn, prompts many to wonder -- how much democratization will the King and his advisors accept? A vigorous political party system attracting a broad swathe of Jordanians, combined with a truly representative parliament with real decision-making powers and an engaged civil society, could eventually threaten the position of the regime's traditional backers. The powerful security services are loathe to permit full freedom of expression and assembly, fearing it could imperil stability. Many in the old-guard East Bank establishment, which dominates top levels of government and the security services, still suspect the true loyalties of the majority Palestinian-Jordanian population and can be expected to resist their political empowerment. How the King handles these anti-reform pressures, and his willingness to transfer at least some of his power to the people (who are more conservative and more opposed to U.S. foreign policy than the GOJ would like to acknowledge), will determine the future of political reform in Jordan.

19. (C) With dramatic political change and opening underway all around Jordan, leaders here are well aware that they need to do more or risk losing their reputation for being in the vanguard of Arab reformers. A word of encouragement from senior U.S. officials to the King during his March 15-22 visit to Washington can help strengthen his awareness that the time to move further on political development is overdue.

MINIMIZE CONSIDERED  
HALE